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ABSTRACT

Twenty-four children aged five and twenty-four children aged six were interviewed individually three times during a calendar year. It was found that not only did the children's language develop over the period, as judged syntactically and lexically, but they also showed an increasingly fluent control over their own style. All the children exhibited, however, certain common factors in their linguistic performance which correlated with factors other than their grammatical competence, namely, the presence of certain features in the situation of the interviews. These non-linguistic features were isolated as: the task set for the children; the topic they were asked to discuss; and the conceptualization by the child of the role of the listener. Although largely ignored by research on child language, situational factors may be very important for assessment, where not only linguistic performance but linguistic competence is concerned. They are important for development theories because where a child uses his best language is a clue as to where language is acquired. Finally, situational effects are important for the design of educational programs because they suggest how we can facilitate the child's talking and his talking in his most advanced language. (Author/AM)

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TASKS, TOPICS, AND THE LISTENER: THEIR EFFECT ON CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

Twenty-four children aged just five and twenty-four children aged just six were interviewed individually three times during a calendar year. It was found that not only did the children's language develop over the period, as judged syntactically and lexically, but also that they showed an increasingly fluent control over their own style.

All the children exhibited, however, certain common factors in their language which correlated with the presence of certain features in the situation of the interviews. These non-linguistic features which appeared to have an effect on the children's language were isolated as: the task set the children, the topic they were asked to discuss, and the conceptualisation by the child of the role of the listener.

In examining the syntactic development of children aged 5-7 (Rogers 1973) it soon became obvious that the observed and recorded linguistic performance of the children depended partly on factors other than their actual grammatical competence. Such factors as the personality, the content of the discussion, and most importantly the amount and nature of the social interaction of the two participants affected to a greater or lesser extent the type of language produced. Three of the most important situational variables to be isolated and discussed in this paper are the topic and the child's involvement in it, the task and the listener.

In her paper 'The situation: a neglected source of social class differences in language use' Cazden (1970) examines a number of situational variables and links them to differences in language performance. She discusses in her paper a number of projects which have looked at these situational variables independently, for example, looking at the topic: four and five year olds talk more about a toy or a silent film of the toy than a still photograph of the toy (Strandberg and Griffith 1969). Young children given ten coloured magazines to talk about, consistently had more to say about some pictures than about others (Cowan et al 1967). School children given stories and pictures and invited to ask questions about them, ask more questions about stories and pictures that are novel or surprising (Berlyne and Frommer, 1966).

The nature of the task also influences the language produced by children. For example, young pre-school children recorded in a variety of activities, produce more speech, and more advanced speech in housekeeping play and group discussion than in play with blocks, dance and woodworking. Both physical factors (such as noise and the presence of something concrete to talk about) and social factors (such as adult participation and the presence of other children) affect the nature and content of the language produced

by the child being interviewed. A study by Verplanck (1955) showed how easily it is for an interviewer to alter the style and content of the language spoken by an adult being interviewed. Smith (1935) found pre-school age children produced longer sentences at home than when playing with other children. The age of the listener may be a factor. One three year old spoke her longest sentences to her mother, her shortest sentences to her younger sister, and intermediate sentences to herself (unpublished results, cited by Cazden, 1970). On the other hand, Frederick (1971) observed a two and a half year old who spoke more to his mother at home but used longer and more advanced sentences at a playgroup. This child had a relatively over-protective mother who administered to his needs almost before they were expressed. The disparity between the two children illustrates the importance for more work on the nature of the relationship between the speaker and the listener as it affects the communicative situation.

THE TASK

At any one time in the interview, the child has a large range of choices as to what exactly he will do: he can decide to speak or be silent, to express ideas or opinions, to mean a or b, to use language variety x or y. Whichever combination the child finally adopts will be at least partly dependent upon the interaction in the child of the child's intention (mainly linguistic for our purposes), the level of his communicative competence and the characteristics of the situation as he perceives it on the basis of past experience. As Hymes (1961) has pointed out:

> "In a society, speech as an activity is not a simple function of the structure and meanings of the language or languages involved. Nor is speech activity random. Like the languages it is patterned, governed by rules; and this patterning also must be learned by linguistically normal participants in the society. Moreover, the patterning of speech activity is not the same from society to society, or from group to group within societies such as our own"
>
> (Hymes, 1961, p 57)

The range of choices available to the child at any stage in an interview can not be fully described even by listing all the utterances of the children; but clearly, consciously or unconsciously, speakers select among all the various aspects of the language in order to communicate meaning above and beyond the merely referential meaning of words and the structure into which they fit.

Children do not have merely one style of language that they use irrespective of whom they are talking to (Piaget 1970). Troike 1970 (p. 67) gives a clear example of how a six year old child is aware of the need for differing levels of appropriateness for different situations. More recent work has suggested that even four year old children's language varies according to certain situational cues (Weeks 1971, Gleason 1973), Sachs and Devin 1976).

In the children I interviewed the most noticeable difference of style is to be seen between the language of the child as he undertakes the two main tasks of the interview --- a description of a given picture and a discussion about something that interests him. It will be seen in the following examples, that the task set the child can affect the language to a great extent.

Extract 1 (a)

Child 1, second interview, description of the picture

Adult What else can you see?

Child Farmer.

Adult What's she doing?

Child Playing with the snow.

Adult What do you think she's got in that thing?

Child Snow.

Adult What about this boy, what's he doing?

Child Feeding them, ducks.

Adult What's this duck doing.

Child Flying.

Extract 1 (b) The same child

Child 1, second interview, free discussion

Adult What happened to the wall?

Child That was wiggly, and my mummy reported it and they came. They started it yesterday. They done that bit of the wall there, there they're doing that wall and Martin and me sat on the wall without putting our feet on the floor. That don't mind if the wall bits get on my garden.

Adult You what?

Child That don't matter if the wall bits get on my garden. There was some at my gate and I threw it on the garden, that don't matter. They'll clear it up anyway.

Adult Is it your garden?

Child No, daddy's. I help him do it sometimes.

Extract 2 (a)

Child 2, second interview, description of the picture

Adult What are some of the people doing?

Child Walking.

Adult What's happening here?

Child On a slide.

Adult What's this boy doing, do you think?

Child Pulling a slide.

Adult What's this girl doing?

Child Feeding the ducks.

Adult What are these children doing?

Child Running.

Extract 2 (b)

Child 2, second interview, free discussion

Adult Where are you going?

Child Hemsby, we always go to Hemsby.

Adult And you've got a bungalow or a chalet?

Child We've been in a bungalow. We're going in a Caravan, some of my friends are going there. We'll live to each other. We'll play with each other

(Both children were 5 years old)

The means by which an object, an event, a topic is referred to, is varied, as can be seen from the previous four excerpts from the transcripts. A major distinction in the descriptions of the children in the interviews seems to be that they are only prepared to name the objects and events depicted in the pictures. As a result the answers to questions concerning the pictures are generally brief, factual descriptions.

Extracts 1(a) and 2(a) illustrate this most clearly. The children see the questions concerning the pictures as ones which demand only a naming or referential response. This type of behaviour of the children, was extremely common in all, irrespective of their schools and school classes.

THE TOPIC

The amount of personal interest is another important factor affecting the linguistics performance of children and involvement in the topic of the conversation. Cazden (1972, pp. 206-207) reports on some research which seems to give a clear indication that the level of personal involvement of the child can affect the extent to which the child mobilises his full language knowledge, and the level of involvement can also affect the structural complexity of the language produced by the child.
In this respect Cazden (1972, p. 207) reports on the research carried out by Strandberg and Griffith (1968):

> "(they) gave four and five year old children in a university laboratory school Kodak Instamatic cameras loaded with colour film and then elicited conversation about the (remarkably successful) pictures the children took. The children talked more spontaneously (that is required fewer adult probes) and talked in longer and more complex utterances about the pictures they took at home of personally significant objects such as a favourite climbing tree or a close-up of Mother's mouth, than they did about pictures taken under adult direction during the period of orientation to the camera. Since the pictures taken at home were also frequently of only one object, the authors conclude that the difference lay in the degree of personal involvement.

Although topic was compounded with order, since all the children told stories about the pre-selected objects first, it seems unlikely that this accounted for all the difference. Following are examples of one five year old's stories, first about the assigned picture and then about one of his choice:

That's a horse. You can ride it. I don't know any more about it. It's black, brown and red. I don't know my story about the horse.

There's a picture of my tree that I climb in. There's- there's where it grows at, and there's where I climb up- and sit up there down there and that's where I look out. First I get on this one and then I get on that other one. And then I put my foot under that big branch that are strong. And then I pull my face up and then I get a hold of a branch up at that place- and then I look around."

(Strandberg and Griffith, 1969) Cazden (1972, p. 207)

The two excerpts given immediately above can be seen to illustrate by how much the level of performance can vary in the same child. It is almost impossible to decide how much weight should be given in any one instance to the effect of the topic per se and how much weight should be given to the amount and quality of the child's personal involvement. For instance, some of the results of Cowan et al (1967 pp. 191-203) would suggest that over the great range of children they examined and interviewed, there were certain topics or pictures which tended to receive the same kind of language response. Some topics tended to generate more language, which was also more complex, than other topics. Thus suggesting either:

(a) that the topics themselves had a fairly regular effect on the majority of children as far as their language was concerned: or,

(b) that it was the children's reaction to the topic, i.e. their involvement personally in the conversation which had the effect on the language.

Below are some examples of the language produced by children in response to the same sort of questions from the adult interviewer:

Extract 3

What did you do when you went home from school last night?

(a) Child 4

Adult What did you do when you went home from school last night?

Child Why? I don't know.

Adult Did you play in the garden?

Child I play with my bike.

Adult You've got a bike, have you?

Child Yes, a two-wheeler.

Adult Two bikes?

Child Yes I got a two-wheeler and my brother got a two wheeler bike.

(b) Child 7

Adult What did you play at home last night?

Child Catchings, and when Julie come home she have to catch you. She keep hiding up for me.

Adult Why is that?

Child When I come in the door I got to find her.

Adult And what do you do when you find her?

Child Slap her across the bum.

(c) Child 17

Adult What did you do when you went home from school last night?

Child Played out.

Adult What sort of things did you play?

Child Played in my shed.

Adult What sort of shed have you got?

Child A white one.

Adult What sort of games can you play in there?

Child Skipping.

Extract 4

What did you do in the summer holidays?

(a) Child 13

Adult What did you do in the holidays?

Child Play and that.

Adult Did you go away?

Child Yes, up me nanny's.

Adult What did you do up your nanny's?

Child Play.

Adult What sort of place does your nanny live in?

Child Carlisle.

(b) Child 9

Adult What did you do in the holidays, Michelle?

Child I went up me nanny's. I like going up me nanny's. I get a new colouring book. I had one when I went to the city and I'll get another one today.

Adult Are you going up the city today?

Child No, me nanny's going to get it for me.

(c) Child 6

Adult What did you do in the holidays?

Child Play on banks and play my friends.

Adult What sort of things did you play?

Child Played with Andrew, Nicky, Donna, Paula, Garry, and Samantha and Louise, Kerry, Debra Cox and Tracy Rose here.

Adult I know Tracy Rose.

Child She's six now. So's Samantha.

Adult What sort of things did you do with them?

Child Play with them and play mothers and fathers.

Adult Did you go away on holiday?

Child Not yet, only Samantha did in a caravan. I went in a bungalow.

(The children were all 5 year old)

A number of factors emerge from an examination of the above examples. First of all it ought to be noted that the two types of questions are similar in that they ask that the child recounts what happened to him in the recent past. Furthermore, the topic of each question is undoubtedly the child himself. Each of them is asked "What did you do ...". Secondly, the children's replies are to some extent dependent upon what they actually did. If it happened that the night before, the recent holidays, had not been unusual at all or utterly unexciting then we might expect the language to be dull and that the interviewer had to coax out what had happened by constant questioning. This is particularly noticeable in extract 3(c); later on in the same interview, the same child is willing to discuss at some length an impending addition to her family. Whilst the two questions, which form the originating questions for the two sets of discourse in the examples 3 and 4 above, can clearly be understood to mean literally what they say, there is however an implicit meaning 'behind' them. This implicit meaning may be expressed as:

"Tell me something that interested you about last night (or the holiday)"

The ability to see an implied meaning to a question posed in a conversation appears to be something that has to be learned.

It appears that the children of the ages studied in this investigation were not entirely aware of the quality that may be called 'conversational meaning'. That they were not wholly aware of it can be seen by looking at the response in extract 3 (c) to the questions:

Adult What sort of shed have you got?

Child A white one.

The child in 3(a), similarly, is more interested in his bicycle than what games he played; whereas the girl in 3(b) is interested in answering the question by talking about her game of 'catching'.

THE LISTENER

For the child to adapt his style of speech to the needs of the listener requires that he has to take on roles other than the one he most usually adopts. The child has to come to realise that he and the listener are different people with different areas of knowledge. In particular, the young child has to learn that things about which he has intimate knowledge are not known by his listener. The assumption by the child that an adult knows all about him is a fairly common one, and can be seen to be held by many of the younger children in the interviews. They assume that the interviewer knows the family, the home and many of the background details of whatever is being talked about. A certain number of these assumptions are made perhaps because the interviewer was taken to be another teacher by the children in the school and so was thought to be privy to many of these kinds of homely details. Flavell et al (1968), who have studied role taking in children, state that it is a process which develops with age and is linked to conceptual and/or cognitive maturity; they remark that there are a number of requirements:

"Where role taking does play an effective part ....

several important things are assumed to occur.

> First, the speaker attends very carefully to the listener, attempting to discern his powers and limitations as an audience for the data in question. Second, the resulting image of listener role attributes functions continuously to shape the organisation and content of the message. The image acts as a monitor, a sort of communicative servo-mechanism, which dictates a recording wherever the speaker's spontaneous self-coding would be likely to fail to communicate. And finally, this monitoring activity is assumed to require real vigilance and effort on the speaker's part, because a recoded message is never the path of least resistance."
>
> (Flavell et al, 1968, pp. 95-96)

The tasks used in Flavell's experiment required a series of role taking shifts by the children. To summarise the results of this research: the six year old child has some awareness that differences in perspective between the speaker and the listener exist, he has some ability to judge that these differences are in the more obvious cases of visual perceptions but not in the more hidden cases of information or intentions. Furthermore, he appears to have little awareness of a need to analyse the other's point of view if not explicitly instructed to do so. There follow three examples of the different ways children have of explaining things to the interviewer and how much they make explicit in what they actually say. The extracts are taken from the same set of interviews; the children are all aged 5 years.

Extract 5

Adult Is it a paddling pool or a swimming pool?

Child A swimming pool.

Adult What sort of things can you do in there?

Child I nearly I swim, I can anybow. So can Carol, so can Raymond, so can Glenn. When we was down the seaside Raymond fell in there and daddy went and got him and Glenn went in there and got daddy and he fell on the top of his head and hurt hisself.

Extract 6

Adult What did you do when you went home from school last night?

Child I went up my nanny's.

Adult What did you do there?

Child I went outside to play with Butchy.

Adult Who's Butchy?

Child My dog.

Adult Your dog or your nanny's dog?

Child My nanny's dog.

Adult What sor of things do you play with Butchy?

Child Lead.

Adult How do you mean 'lead'?

Child My sisters come outdoor and get hold of the other one and one get hold of the other one and he try and jump up and catch the lead.

Adult What else did you do last night?

Child Kenny come up.

Adult Who's Kenny?

Child My uncle, he's going to live with my nanny.

Extract 7

Adult What else did you do?

Child I made a clay model out of wood. A wood pecker. and then I made another big iron ship.

Adult How do you made a clay model out of wood?

Child I made the nose out of wood and the body of wood and then I made the head out of clay. Other kids were trying to make a clay house and they couldn't. I've made a clay house, they were trying to make one.

Adult And they couldn't do it?

Child No I done it. I made one and that was a witch's house and there's a witch in the garden putting all the children in, and when she turned round she saw the witch had come up behind her and then she made the magic spell on the washing, she done.

In extract (5) the child does not explain what 'fell in there' refers to; it may be that she meant to refer back to 'seaside' or at least the 'sea' part of 'seaside'. Without this important referential notion the description of the event is difficult to understand. The phrase 'in there' is used once again without 'there' being made any clearer or more explicit. The last, long utterance, by being constructed of a sequence of $S_1 + S_2$ type operations, is unclear; this lack of clarity is made worse by the use of the pronoun 'he' without specifying either 'Glenn' or 'daddy'. A common rule of performance in such cases is that the pronoun refers to the closest previously uttered noun, although the last utterance in extract (7) seems not to be an example of this rule of performance.

The child who gives us extract (6) assumes that the listener has an intimate knowledge and understanding of her family. She introduces Butchy the dog and Kenny the uncle without any explanation. It is interesting to examine how members of the family or other people are introduced in the children's conversations, very often they are introduced as names only without any explanation as to who they are. For example the child from extract (5) is asked a little earlier in the same interview:

Adult Who do you play with?

Child Carol and Ray and Glenn.

Other examples are:

Adult Who did you play with?

Child Helen.

Adult Who's she?

Child She's my friend.

Adult Who sleeps in the front room?

Child Me and three of us Debbie and Tina.

This is the first time in the interview that any of them are mentioned. It appears that there is a difference to be drawn between the case of 'Carol and Ray and Glenn' and 'lead'. Most of the children genuinely seem unable, at the age of five years, to realise that the adult interviewer does not, indeed cannot, know the intimate details of the children's family life. To this extent, then, they are unable to put themselves in the position of the other participant in the interview. As the children grew older the tendency was for members of the family (apart from mothers and fathers) to be introduced not by name but by relationship. So at seven years an example is:

Child The first day I was in bed and the second day my brother stayed with me.

and later on in the same interview

Child We just rode it back I couldn't ride it then so my sister helped me.

The girl in extract 6 appears to believe that the game she calls 'lead' is as well known as, say, 'mothers and fathers' or 'hide and seek'. But as far as it can be established, the game she calls 'lead', is private, privately-named, game. Whatever the game is, the child has made little attempt to adapt her language to the needs of the listener. The nature and purpose of the game is so well known to her that she only explains it using language which refers very much to the actual context of the game. Her use of the term 'the other one' is not so easily understood except, perhaps, in relation to the 'lead', so that 'lead' is now to be seen as a noun meaning 'dog's lead' rather than a verb 'to lead'.

Research on child language has generally ignored situational effects on language and language development. Nevertheless, situational differences may be even more important than social class differences; important for assessment, for theories of development, and for educational consideration. Situational effects are important for this study, because we are interested in the child's competence - the best he can do - as well as in performance - how well he actually does in particular settings. They are important for theories of development because the answer to the question 'Where is the child using his most advanced language?' is also a clue to where language is being acquired. And finally, situational effects are important for the design of educational programmes because they suggest how we can facilitate the child's talking and his talking in his most advanced language.

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